



Service Learning Project Review

by Robin Gal – Bentley School

Overview:

If you teach students to volunteer, you create an activist for life; if you teach students to teach others to volunteer, you change the world.

Independent School Network: Participants

When I joined the fellows program, I wanted to create an opportunity for independent school students in the East Bay to realize that they were part of a larger independent school network as well as the greater community. Traditionally, East Bay Independent Schools (EBISC) have come together for athletic competition, dances, and a yearly student council meeting to which all the EBISC members are invited. By engaging students from a variety of independent schools, I hoped students could expand their understanding of other schools beyond academic and athletic competition, make new friends, and re-evaluate the labels that each independent school has within the community. Finally, I wanted the project to be student driven, and I wanted the students to select an activity they felt valuable.

Greater Community: Commitment and Purpose

While the dances and student council discussions have brought our students together and are necessary for their social and emotional development (albeit a bit deafening for the chaperones), I wanted to address a much larger issue. I wanted students to understand that they have a role beyond that of student; they are young citizens, and their work on student councils can affect change in their communities.

Currently, student understanding of citizenship is primarily derived from their academic life and coursework in humanities, social studies, current events, civics, and community service requirements at schools where service is an established practice. The academic coursework addresses the abstract meaning of civics and defines the responsibilities of a citizen in terms of a written social and political framework. The community service requirements are meant to give practical meaning to the framework studied in classes. Unfortunately, some students and families see community service requirements as an opportunity to burnish a resume for application to high school or college rather than a life changing experience. The sense of empowerment that can be derived from civic work can be missing from both the coursework and community service requirements. The students are giving time and/or money in exchange for the fulfillment of requirement to move them ahead. The question of what is learned and the sense of mutuality that comes from a service-based learning experience can languish in the paperwork tracking number of hours students have spent fulfilling a requirement, adding to the resume, the parental huffing and puffing necessary to transport students from here to there, and the traditional faculty hair-pulling when yet again students are not in academic classes.

With this in mind, I wanted a project that would:

- Empower students in terms of learning that civic action can affect positive change,
- Engage to students,
- Garner community and faculty support,

- Reduce parent involvement,
- Be student driven with regard to the selection and organization of the project,
- Inspire students to repeat the process in future years, and
- Involve students from a variety of local independent schools in a civic project that would bring them together not just to discuss their roles but to act upon those roles.

Process:

The most difficult part of the project that I had outlined would be selecting an appropriate service learning opportunity that met the goals outlined above and coordinating with the various schools. Administrators from the local independent schools do not meet regularly and pride themselves on being independent. Also, many schools are reluctant to give student council members time off to meet together for service learning. I needed to overcome the barriers in terms of administrative coordination and show that service learning that engaged the wider independent school system was a valuable part of an independent school education.

Quarter Meals

I began by meeting with my Student Council and asking about projects that would engage them and students from other schools while reducing their reliance on adult involvement. We considered a variety of options including a food drive in which schools would compete to gather by weight the most food for the Alameda Food Bank. In the middle of our discussions, we learned that Berkeley Quarter Meals, a food project where many of our students have volunteered, would be cutting its program. We immediately decided that we needed to help. Although the agency needed money, and we wanted to avoid yet another drive, we decided that Quarter Meals was too valuable for our students as well as those it serves to allow funding cuts to close its doors. Our dilemma became how to raise money without tapping yet again into our typical resources: penny jars, parents, allowances, car washes, bake sales, and the like. Also, the amount of money Quarter Meals needed was significant: \$25,000 by June.

The Council voted to give \$2,500 raised from its student store to Berkeley Quarter Meals and then came up with the idea to ask other independent schools to match the donation. Those schools matching the donation would be invited to a dance. The cover charge would be given to Quarter Meals as well, and the Student Council would pay for the disc jockey and the dance once again from its budget, primarily derived from its student store.

Student Store

Bentley's Middle School runs a student store, which embodies all aspects of service learning. Student Council is expected to stock the store, and student volunteers work weekly during lunch selling the items. Each Friday, the Student Council treasurer counts the store's earnings and provides the business office with the weekly accounting so that it is reflected in the Student Council's monthly budget. While the store is often a nuisance, given it is student supervised and operated, the lessons those participating in the store learn are invaluable. In addition to running the store, the students must determine what behaviors are acceptable around the store and set limits in terms of purchases. Some of the questions raised include: Are students buying too many candy bars, have they waited in line, are they giving their purchases away in an inappropriate manner, is the money being handled properly? While the Student Council is responsible for the store, any student may volunteer to work in the store. The Council oversees the volunteers and trains them.

The store is essentially three closets. One closet contains the dry goods the students sell, the second has two microwaves for heating food, and the third holds a refrigerator. The Student Council is responsible for managing and stocking the store. The store is typically stocked monthly. Parents volunteer for this responsibility at the beginning of the year when all of them review all of the Middle School volunteer opportunities. The decision about what should be stocked is a difficult one, and it involves determining what is healthy and what will sell. Although dodging this heated discussion each fall does come to mind, I have found that it frequently is one of the most educational I have with the Student Council. Our discussion involves nutrition, agri-business, food additives and health risks, advertising techniques, body image, genetically altered foods, and more---- all within one lunch period! While the discussion is educational, fret with the angst of Middle School students

seeking independence and the Middle School Head attempting to infuse wisdom and avoid phone calls from parents wondering about the nutritional value of a Snicker's bar, we conclude by balancing our best intentions with market trends. Currently, the store stocks dry soup, chips, sweets, drinks that are primarily derived from juice, jerky, and more.

The store grosses about \$3,000 to \$4,000 annually and has a net income of about \$2,000 to \$3,000. The student store money, along with money raised at dances and through spirit and special food days, is what the Student Council manages. The Council determines how the money will be allocated through our advisories. Each Tuesday, the Council meets, and the secretary keeps the minutes. The minutes are read during our Wednesday advisory period so that students can vote on Council proposals.

The Quarter Meal Middle School Dance:

Working with School Administrators, Staff, and Other Schools

The Student Council first needed to check Bentley's master calendar to pick a date when the Upper School gym would be available. Next, the Council made notices advertising its Quarter Meals dance and faxed the notices to the East Bay Independent Schools. In addition to faxing the information, the Council also called the schools. I supervised as the students asked my assistant to help with creating the dance notice using Publisher Software, learned from the Assistant to the Head how to use the fax machine, and sat at my desk calling the middle schools listed in the CAIS directory. Occasional reminders about appropriate office conduct were needed when students reclined in my chair and rested their feet on the desk.

The students soon noticed how difficult it can be to coordinate an activity with a variety of schools. Trying to determine who was in charge of various student councils, and who the student council representatives were, proved challenging. My Council needed not only to invite the schools to the dance but also to encourage them to match the funds that Bentley was donating. Because of communication lapses, some schools wondered whether they had to raise the same amount as Bentley to participate; others wondered how to raise funds. As a result of the Student Council's experience, the Council realized the need for a directory of EBISC student council advisors and student council officers and may decide to create the directory next year as a service learning project.

Involving Parents

Once the date for the dance had been set, Student Council needed to solicit parent volunteers to chaperone and to provide drinks and snacks. While parents were mildly eager to chaperone and compare current middle school dance rituals to those from their youth, I discovered our students would rather take ERBs than to spot their parents across a dance floor. Emails were sent to the parents and follow up phone calls were placed before we had a complete muster of parents. Knowing we had invited 500 students, we would need as many as 20 parent volunteers from Bentley, and faculty advisors as well as additional parents from each school invited to the dance.

The Dance

A week before the Quarter Meals dance, the Upper School decided to sponsor a dance as well--- just across the quad from the gym where the Middle School dance was planned. We solved what could have been a logistical nightmare by asking a phalanx of parent volunteers to form the Magino Line, which no student could cross. The Upper School students were not even vaguely interested in the Middle School students, only the snacks the parents had brought, while the Middle School students were very interested in the Upper School activities. Fortunately, the Magino Line held, approximately 450 middle school students from six schools enjoyed a full evening of dancing, and the last song played at 9:50 PM, allowing time for students to clean up.

Thanks and Reflection

After the dance, the Council convened to discuss the dance and send thank you notes to the Middle School parents. We wrote a generic letter and copied one per family since so many families had helped in a variety of ways. The letters were divided among the Council, and each Council member added a personal note at the

bottom of the letter. The Council then stuffed and Pitney Bowes'd (used the mail machine to seal and stamp) the letters. During this process, students reflected on the dance. They liked having students from a variety of schools come to the dance, but they wished they could have educated those in attendance more about Quarter Meals.

A Final Reflection- The Bottom Line:

Bentley's Middle School, through the dance, raised an addition \$1,300 for Quarter Meals. Other schools contributed approximately \$1,000. The total from Bentley, \$3,800, and the \$1,000 gave Quarter Meals nearly one-fifth of what it needed in terms of funding within approximately eight weeks.

As part of the coordinated effort to raise funds for Quarter Meals, the Student Council invited Marcie Jordan, the Executive Director of the Berkeley Food and Housing Project which runs Quarter Meals, to speak to the Middle School. Jordan and a board member, Betsy Strode, addressed the Middle School during a town hall after which Jordan and Strode had lunch and an informal meeting with the Council. Listening to Jordan's personal stories about homelessness and hunger, the Council began to realize the full value of its efforts on behalf of Quarter Meals. Raising funds without the direct connection to the agency for which these funds are designated removes the sense of immediacy and personal relationship necessary to understand the power of giving. Bentley's Middle School students had not only volunteered for Quarter Meals and had helped serve its clients, but the Middle School had now also worked to keep the agency open.

The Council's commitment to Quarter Meals was moving for me. I realize that our outreach to other schools could have been broader, and the education about Quarter Meals within our independent school community stronger, but the Council's commitment and resourcefulness inspired me. As the Council organized the dance, it became involved in the administrative structures of not only Bentley but other schools as well. Bentley became a school for students, not just about students and education. Student learning included:

- Managing the student store for a specific fund raising purpose,
- Decision making around funds raised from the student store,
- Educating the Middle School about the funding cuts Quarter Meals faced,
- Using advisory as a venue for involving the entire Middle School in the decision to send funds to Quarter Meals,
- Organizing a dance,
- Working with school staff and administrators,
- Using fax, mail machines, and copiers,
- Soliciting parent volunteers,
- Writing thank you notes,
- Inviting speakers to town hall,
- And calling news organizations to cover the fundraising activities

While the primary purpose for this service learning project was fund raising, the activities involved were varied, crossed the curriculum, engaged students from a variety of schools, and provided opportunities for Bentley's Middle School to learn how its resources can be used to affect change in positive ways.

This paper is a result of research conducted by the author. Any use of this material in any theme, essay, term paper, research paper, thesis, or dissertation should be credited to the author. This research was conducted with the support of the Bay Area Teacher Development Collaborative.

